

"Be not deceived"

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The warnings against deception that are found in the New Testament Epistles are indeed remarkable. We might have imagined that Christians of the first century, many of whom were converted under apostolic preaching, would have been proof against it; but such evidently was not the case. We of the twentieth century are doubtless more liable to it than they were, so we shall be wise to take notice of the apostolic warnings against it.

Deception may often assail us **from without**, for Satan is the great deceiver, and he has plenty of agents in this world of fallen men. Yet the most seductive sort are those that are generated within ourselves. We find such words, for instance, as, "Let no man deceive you," occurring both in Ephesians 5: 6, and, 2 Thessalonians 2: 3; though the former were believers of a maturer and more instructed sort, while the latter were comparatively babes in Christ. On the other hand, we find such warnings as, "Let no man deceive himself," and on several occasions, "Be not deceived," where the inference is, we judge, that the trouble was generated **from within**. In this paper we confine ourselves to the various forms of self-deception.

If we turn to 1 Corinthians 3: 18, we get the words we have just quoted. When, pursuing his evangelistic labours, Paul reached Corinth, he was well aware that as a Greek city many of the inhabitants were well saturated with Athenian philosophy and learning. Hence he approached them after the fashion he described in 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5; and hence, taught of God, he discerned in the infatuation for leading men of gift, that had come over them all — described in 1 Corinthians 1: 12 — a reversion to their old ideas, exalting human intellect and wisdom. They were deceiving themselves as to its real nature and true value.

Paul's words are drastic indeed! "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world [age], let him become a fool, that he may be wise." None too drastic however in the light of what follows; for he had to say, "the wisdom of this world [**kosmos**] is foolishness with God." Now "**kosmos**" signifies the world as an ordered system, and in the ordering of the system all human wisdom has been engaged. Well, what a mess the world is in! Out of it there will be no emergence until Divine power, exercised in Divine wisdom, steps in.

We have to remember that knowledge and wisdom are different things. The area covered by the former has vastly increased in our day as compared with the first century, yet the Apostle could write, "We all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity [love] edifieth [buildeth up]" (1 Cor. 8: 1). With knowledge of a genuine sort there is nothing wrong, but the men, who acquire the knowledge, being fallen sinners, are puffed up by it to their own undoing; since wisdom is the ability to apply and rightly use the knowledge one has acquired. That ability fallen man has not.

An able Christian writer coined an apt phrase when he wrote of "Mr. Worldly Wiseman." The man of the world, who is accounted wise, is one who possesses the practical sense that enables him to use his knowledge for his own profit, advancement or exaltation, and sometimes for the advancement of the whole human race, according to worldly standards. And besides this wisdom of a practical sort there is that of a theoretical and philosophic kind, for which Athens was famous; so that they, "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17: 21). As to God and His things they had no real knowledge, hence their wisdom was completely astray.

In the eyes of these ancient philosophers, whether Athenian or Corinthian, the Gospel that Paul preached was foolishness. In the eyes of God their learned thinkings and talkings were folly and ignorance. The stranger standing by as a listener on Mars Hill, might have said, "Just fancy this man talking to these learned men about, the unknown God, whom they **ignorantly** worshipped, and about these times of **their ignorance!**" But such was the case, and because of it Paul had to remind us that the man, who would be accounted wise by worldly standards, must become what the same standards would consider a fool, if he would be really wise according to God. And ultimately only the Divine wisdom is going to prevail and stand.

In its essential features the modern world is no different from the ancient world, and therefore the Apostle's warning applies equally to us. On the surface things have developed in such a surprising fashion that we may easily be deceived into thinking that the "things of God," which display His wisdom, and which have been revealed and communicated to us, as stated in 1 Corinthians 2, must be modified somewhat to bring them into line with the wisdom of the world.

Against such deception we are warned, and it may help us if we remember two statements previously made by Paul. (1) God has said, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to **nothing**, the understanding of the prudent." (2) "The princes of this world . . . come to **naught**." The wise leaders of this world and their wisdom are both coming to NOTHING. So let us not be deceived.

The believers living in the intellectual city of Corinth were evidently specially liable to deception, for in later chapters we twice find the Apostle writing, "Be not deceived." (1 Cor. 6: 9, and 1 Cor. 15: 33), and each time matters of morality are in question. It is sadly possible for men of high philosophic thought and utterance to be quite dissolute in their lives. Men of evil and immoral life abounded in their city but such had no part in the kingdom of God; and in such lives many of the saints in Corinth had been involved, though now they were washed, sanctified and justified. No amount of specious talk was to blind their minds as to the purity of God's kingdom.

And further, they were not to deceive themselves as to the source from which such evils flowed - "Evil communications corrupt good manners." We are told that Paul quoted this striking sentence of five words from a Greek author, who would be well known at Corinth, Menander by name. It may well have been so, for heathen authors sometimes state what is true enough, and it is easy to forget that evil teachings produce evil lives in those who imbibe the teachings. If professing Christians at Corinth, or elsewhere, embrace philosophic notions, which affirm there is no resurrection, or at least none that affects the body, there will soon be mischievous results.

It is quite common today to hear people state that it does not really matter what we believe: all that matters is the living of a good and decent life. This assertion simply means that doctrine is really of no consequence; whereas it is of all importance. The man of the world in his business affairs knows this right enough. If in his business he gets wrong advice, and so believes the state of the market to be what it is not, his affairs will soon go awry. If a saint accepts false teaching, his life will soon manifest its evil effects.

So this warning is very important today, since false doctrine is abroad and knocking at our doors, so to speak, more than ever. To be sound in the faith of Christ is of first importance. Let us not deceive ourselves as to this.

We pass now to Galatians 6: 7, where again we get the admonition, "Be not deceived." And as the point here is the order that God has instituted in His holy government, both in natural things surrounding us, and in the moral affairs of our lives, we are told that even if we do deceive ourselves we shall not be able to mock God by altering the results. In nature every seed produces, "after his

kind," as is repeated ten times in Genesis 1. The Galatian saints were warned that the same law would operate as to their daily conduct, just as also it does with us today.

Though, as born of God, we have a new nature, the old nature — the flesh — is still in us. We pass through our lives like a man walking through a field with two baskets of seed. The basket on his left has in it the things of the flesh. That on his right has in it the things of the Spirit. Everything practically depends upon his action. Into which basket does he dip his hand to scatter seed? Whatever he may think, he will reap according to what he sows, for he cannot mock God by altering or evading His law.

Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can indulge the flesh and yet reap spiritual good and blessing. That will only be reached as we cultivate the things of the Spirit of God. It would be a profitable and healthy thing for each of us, when confronted with some trying and unlooked for event, to ask ourselves, Has there been on my part some sowing to the flesh, which has produced this distressing harvest? At any rate, if we do not deceive ourselves on this point, we shall live our lives with care and sobriety and in the spirit of self-judgment, and reap life everlasting as the result.

Very closely connected with this is the warning given to us by the Apostle James in verse 22 of his first chapter, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." It is very evident that the individual, who likes merely to listen to nice sermons and unfoldings of truth, without any concern as to his life being governed by what he hears, is not likely to deceive anyone else. Even the unbelievers with whom he comes into contact, will soon detect how unreal he is. But he may sadly deceive himself.

Is this warning needed today? Let us hang our heads in shame and confess with sorrow that it is. Needed specially, we judge, by many of us, who have been privileged to hear and to read many valuable and enlightening unfoldings of the truth of God. How far has the truth that we know worked itself out into expression in our lives? Have we ever heard the ironic remark made, that some Christians are marked by "high talk and low walk"? Could such a thing be justly said of ourselves? God forbid that it should be!

We must not deceive ourselves on this point. Truth is made known to us that it may exert its governing effect on our lives. The Pauline epistles, for instance, not only expound truth but in their later chapters apply the truth stated, so that it may govern our lives. In Romans, for instance, the first eight chapters expound the Gospel, but in chapters 12-15, we are instructed in the kind of life that the Gospel demands. The same is true of the Epistle to the Ephesians, where the truth as to the Church, its nature and privileges is unfolded. From Ephesians 4: 17, the truth revealed is applied to the behaviour of those who compose the church.

It is an ever-present danger confronting the intellectual and well-instructed believer, that he should be content to become a kind of philosophic theologian, well versed in the higher details of the faith, and its heavenly privileges, without concerning himself as to the manner of life which such heavenly truth demands. We all need to utter as a prayer what some of us have before now sung as a hymn:-

O make us each more holy,
In spirit, pure and meek;
More like to heavenly citizens,
As more of heaven we speak.

Lastly we may glance at 1 John 1: 8, where we read, "If we say that we have no sin, we **deceive ourselves**, and the truth is not in us." The Apostle wrote these **words** about 60 years after the coming of the Spirit of God, at a time when many false notions were found amongst professing Christians, and as a consequence false claims were being made. Notice how we get three times in 1 John 1, the words, "If we say . . .", and again three times in the early part of 1 John 2, the words, "He that saith" These claims had to be tested.

The true saint is born of God, and if we read carefully the verses 1 John 2: 28 - 1 John 3: 9, it is evident that thereby we possess a new nature which is sinless. Yet, while we are still in our present mortal bodies, we have the flesh, with all its sinful tendencies, still in us. In very easy, yet subtle ways, the flesh works, and hence, "In many things we offend all" (James 3: 2), and this confession is followed by an allusion to what we say, for an idle **word** can so swiftly escape our lips; indeed the wise man of the Old Testament has told us that, "the **thought** of foolishness is sin" (Prov. 24: 9).

The entertaining of a foolish thought, to say nothing of the utterance of an idle word, proves that sinful flesh is still in us. To persuade ourselves into thinking otherwise would prove that we are deceiving ourselves as to the true nature of sin, regarding it only as the committing of outward acts of reprehensible or immoral nature. The holiness to which we are called goes far deeper than merely the avoiding of wrongful outward acts.

He who is not deceived as to this, will confess his sins into the ear of the Father, who is faithful and just, in the light of the work of the Son, to forgive and to cleanse; as the next verse says. Tenderness of conscience and integrity of heart will preserve us from self-deception in this matter.

And the same things, coupled with humble observance of, and subjection to, the Word of God, will deliver us from all the deceptions we have had before us.